

The Birds of Paradise

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*Whilst the fleet of canoes o'er the ocean are paddled
The flocks of gods are above in the heavens flying.* —Maori song; Beckwith 1970:90

INTRODUCTION

IN THE OCEAN WORLD OF POLYNESIA, birds—especially seabirds—played an important symbolic role, and had enormous influence on the ancient seafarers of the Pacific. In both myth and cult, the bird theme is the most widespread, but least understood, of the symbolic elements found throughout Polynesia (Handy 1940:323). Many studies in the past have connected birds with visual images found throughout Oceania. Even such a simple element as a V-shape in body paint and tattoo indicated a human connection with birds (Schuster 1939; 1952). In Polynesia, bird imagery ran the gamut from a simple V or W shape to the elaborately painted birds seen today in Easter Island caves (Figure 1), to combinations of human and bird that form the famous image of birdman in that isolated island culture (Figure 2).

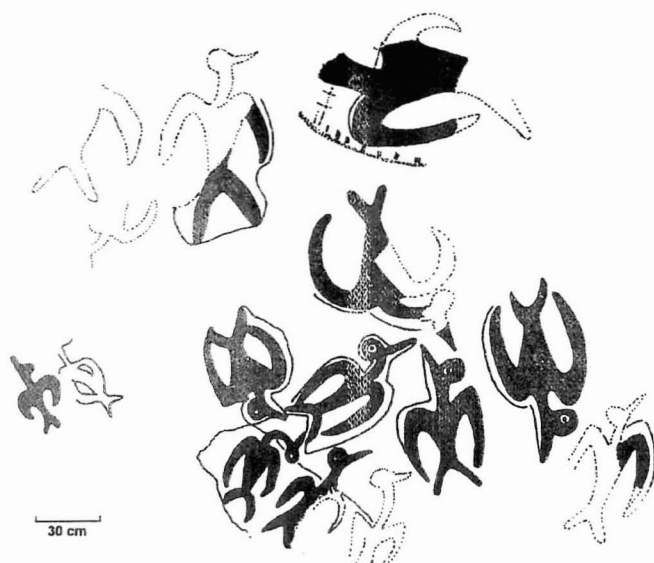


Figure 1. Red and white painted birds wheel on the ceiling of Ana Kai Tangata, Easter Island.

Sea birds had tremendous importance for seafaring Polynesians. They served as givers of omens, guides, totems, a food resource, and vehicles for spirits of the gods and the dead (Barrow 1967:193). Even going back to the beginning of mythological time, Polynesian legends describe the creation of the god Tangaroa as a bird emerging from a cosmic egg, endlessly revolving in space; he then grew feathers and became the trees of the forest. In Tahiti, the albatross was the "shadow" of Tangaroa; in Hawai'i, it was the special bird of the god Tane. Tane was the lord of the forest and all the creatures who lived

in it. Lono, the god of agriculture, was represented by a long wood post with a bird figure at the top (Beckwith 1970:92, 34). It was forbidden to kill frigate birds in the Marquesas (Williamson 1924, II:282, 291), and from Rotuna comes the legend of two sisters who were said to be miraculously conceived by a great god incarnate in a frigate bird.

The Hawaiian Island of Lana'i has many bird images carved into the rocks; some are human figures with bird-like arms or with plumes extending from the head, implying feathers (Figure 3). Hawaiian myths tell of birds as spirit beings, and migratory birds were messengers for high chiefs who sent them ahead as scouts or to carry messages. Some birds were intended to bear messages to the heavens. The *elepaio* bird was worshipped by canoe makers, and the pilot bird *kiwa'a* conducted navigators to landing places.

A Lana'i legend tells of a man-eating bird called Halulu. A god might appear on earth in bird form, and Hawaiian legends tell of a child born from an egg; it hatched into a many colored bird and became a *kapua* (supernatural being). Flying humans also are mentioned in Hawaiian legends and the cock-like crests on helmets (also seen in sculpture) show bird connections (Lee and Stasack 1999:116).



Figure 2. Easter Island birdman figures carved in bas relief, 'Orongo.

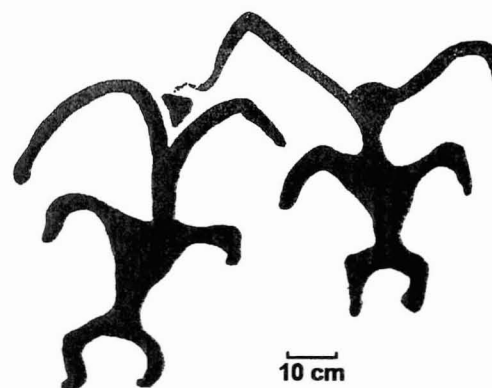


Figure 3. Two of the many human figures with bird attributes, Lana'i, Hawai'i.

In New Zealand, birds (as well as lizards) are vehicles of potent power (Barrow 1967:203) and are elegantly carved in wood. The Marquesans carved wooden bowls in the form of birds, and Easter Islanders included bird figures in their sacred *rongo-rongo* boards.

Birds that dive into water are, in addition, related to the concept of descent into the underworld and have—as creatures of all the elements—connotations of fertility and the transition of life between cosmic planes. For this reason they are so frequently associated with the dead (Barrow 1967:199).

FEATHERS: MANA OF THE GODS

The god Tane was lord of the forest and all its creatures. Tahitian references to the “bird of Tane”, the sacred red bird called *manukura*, reflect the importance of red feathers in which sacred *mana* was concentrated. The *ura* girdle marked royal family status; this was a symbolic umbilical cord binding the gods and man. It was made of sacred red feathers, lock-stitched on tapa backing. The needle was also sacred and never taken out because it was meant to continue forever, with new sections being added with each successive reign. A human sacrifice was made for the first putting in of the needle, and two more sacrifices were made during the course of the work. One chiefly girdle from Ra’iatea was 21 feet long and 6 inches wide (Poignant 1967:43). Many of the most sacred images of Hawai’i are completely covered with brilliant and symbolic feathers.

Feathers thus symbolized flight and had spiritual connotations. On Rapa Nui they were magical and were worn by priests; they even had a special god of plumage (Barthel 1978:144-5:154-5). All feathers had great value: white roosters were used for magic (ibid.1978:144-5) and early explorers noted individuals wearing headdresses of white and black feathers (Ayers 1973:303). Hawaiian feathered objects are of course prime examples of the spiritual importance of feathers. Plumes and feathers share the power of flight and thus convey it to the wearer.

BIRD IMAGES IN POLYNESIAN ROCK ART

Painted or drawn bird figures are found at some New Zealand rock art sites. Barrow (1967:203) calls them birdmen but



Figure 4. Birdman drawing from Frenchman’s Gully site, South Canterbury, New Zealand.

Trotter and McCulloch (1971:75) argue that these motifs are simply bird figures (Figure 4). Either way, these sites are considered to be quite ancient, dating to the Archaic Maori period.

Only a few carvings or paintings have been noted in Polynesia that specifically depict frigate birds, and these are from Easter Island, located at Mata Ngarau on the crater edge at ‘Orongo (Figure 5) and on the islet of Motu Nui (Figure 6); one has been recorded at Rano Raraku, the statue quarry. Another, distinguished by its two heads, is carved on a topknot (*pukao*) at Ahu Akahanga on the south coast of the island, (Figure 7) and there are some other two-headed examples at ‘Orongo.

The motif of bird-man (*tangata manu*) on Easter Island is curious, as it is the sooty tern (*manutara*) (Figure 8) that was so eagerly sought, at least by the historic period. And yet it is the frigate bird (*makohe*) that is depicted in the combined figure of bird-man (Figure 2). This is clearly seen in the characteristic shape of the beak and pronounced gular pouch. Frigate birds no longer nest on Easter Island nor on its off-shore islets, but they must have done so in the past because the artists who carved the designs clearly were aware of the gular pouch that is characteristic of frigate birds, but which is only inflated during mating. At that time, the gular pouch of the male frigate bird inflates into a spectacular bright-red display (Nelson 1979:95). The fact that red was a sacred color throughout Poly-

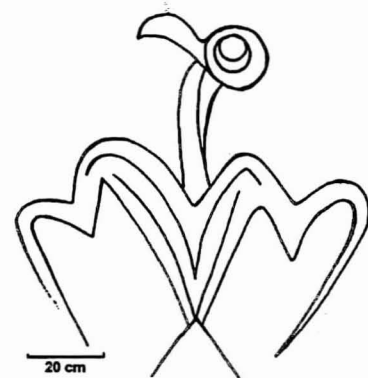


Figure 5. A fine example of a frigate bird from ‘Orongo.



Figure 6. This frigate bird is in a cave shelter at Motu Nui. It seems to have a fish near its mouth and a komari below the right wing.

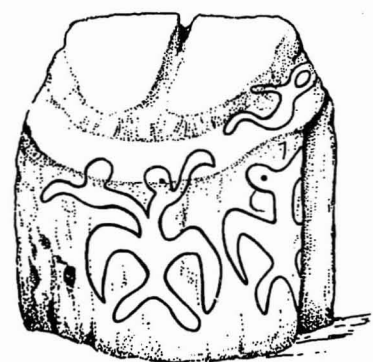


Figure 7. A fallen pukao at the site of Akahanga. This example has a double headed frigate bird as well as a manutara.

nesia surely enhanced this bird in native eyes. McCoy (1978:212) recorded a place name on Motu Iti that informants claimed was the location from which frigate bird eggs were collected in ancient times.

Aside from the red gular pouch, frigate birds were considered special because they are magnificent aerial acrobats; their wingspread reaches 2.5 meters and they have a special mystique in general in that they symbolize territorial and sexual invasion and aggression in many societies (Johannes Wilbert, personal communication 1982). They steal food from other birds on the wing by diving at them and frightening them into dropping their catch; then, swooping down, they catch the fish before it reaches water.

That the frigate became a fitting symbol for the warrior class seems logical in that the characteristics of the birds parallel the aggressiveness of the warriors who were called *tangata rima toto*, or "men with bloodied hands" (Kirch 1984:277). Barthel (1978:151) states that frigate birds were emblems (and perhaps totems) of the *Miru* tribe (the leading chiefly tribe) and of nobility in general.

EASTER ISLAND BIRDMAN CULT

McCoy (1978:196) suggests that the birdman cult developed in response to overexploitation of natural resources. The cult beginnings surely were more complex but the wholesale harvesting of this food resource undoubtedly was a major factor. Due to the nesting habits of the birds in question, the cult focus changed from the frigate bird to the sooty tern: a tern will lay up to three eggs a year if the first two are collected, but the frigate only lays one egg every two years and, if disturbed, will not nest at all. A legend recorded by Métraux (1970:313) suggests that ecological considerations may have been at work: "Makemake...said to Haua: 'Let us go drive the birds to the country' (Rapa Nui)... They both went and drove the birds.... Makemake looked for a nice place. They left the birds at... Kauhanga. They stayed there for three years. The birds were eaten by men, women, and children. Makemake came back with Haua. They chased the birds again and left them at Vaiatare. They waited again for three years. They saw that men ate the eggs. They again drove the birds to the island of Motu-nui. The birds remained in the place where no men were..."

There is more suggested here than just conservation measures, for in a traditional Polynesian society, all that would have been necessary to conserve a resource was to declare a *rahui* (prohibition) on a particular area (Handy 1927:45) or, in the case of Easter Island, a tapu on the collection of bird eggs. That this apparently was not effective suggests a breakdown in the



Figure 8. A sooty tern in flight (from Nelson 1979).

traditional authority of the *ariki*, and is suggestive of food shortages, overpopulation, and perhaps anarchy. We may be seeing hints for the beginning of the birdman cult.

The egg of the frigate bird was probably the prize in the beginning of the cult, which explains the iconography of the birdman. But over time, the focus changed to accommodate the changing ecology as frigate birds stopped nesting, and thus the sooty tern took its place in the cult ceremonies. However, once the canons of the art were established and conventionalized, the form remained because its symbolism validated and defined the social group in power.

As to how the god Makemake became associated with birds, a legend is recorded by Englert (1980:12-13) who describes the god as gazing at his reflection in water; a bird suddenly appeared above and he was startled to see a being with a beak, wings, and feathers. He "joined the two images together."

THE IMPACT OF MAN

Over-exploitation of sea birds and eggs by the native population is, and was, a cause for a drastic decline in bird population. Thousands of sea birds formerly came to Easter Island; today they are a rarity. Easter Island is not unique in this regard. Extinction of land bird communities in Hawai'i and on other islands is well documented. Excavations show that the prehistoric arrival of man coincided with the disappearance of the original bird species. It was not always just a question of eating the birds and eggs, but also introduced species such as rats contributed to the decimation of the bird populations.

On Easter Island, the first settlers relied upon fish, birds, and shellfish while their plants and seedlings were growing. This also occurred on all other colonized Polynesian islands, leading to the extinction of a whole range of species (for example, the giant flightless *moa* of New Zealand) (Bahn and Flenley 1992:91). Excavations at Anakena Beach on Easter Island found the bones of land birds that were quickly eaten to extinction by the earliest settlers (Steadman et al. 1994).

SIGNIFICANCE OF BIRDMAN

"Becoming" a bird or being accompanied by a bird indicates the capacity to undertake an ecstatic journey to the sky (Eliade 1975:234). Seclusion, sexual abstinence and food tapu are well-documented practices (Furst 1972:346-8); these were also part of the birdman ritual. Assigning a sacrificial victim in shamanistic practice makes possible the sending of a message or communicating directly with the gods (Eliade 1975:244).

In Samoa, the plover (*turi*) appears in a creation myth as *ata* (reflection) of a god (Handy 1927:20). The Samoan bird ritual is the only one that bears any resemblance to the birdman cult of Easter Island. Williamson (1924,II:237) describes great pigeon catching festivals which were held in Samoa from June to October and which involved elaborate preparations and whole districts of on-lookers. Only chiefs could catch these sacred birds—so sacred that they only could be spoken to in chief's language. In the Samoan rite, tame pigeons were used as decoys and birds were caught in nets. Strict regulations prevailed and much debauchery is said to have occurred. All the chiefs participating in the ritual were considered sacred and

equal during the rites but at the end of each day, the one who had caught the most birds was declared a hero and received various kinds of foods which he then shared with his less successful competitors. Williamson (1924,II:237) compares this ritual with the birdman cult on Easter and wonders if a similar idea was the basis for both.

Throughout human history birds have been equated with the supernatural. Flight itself is seen as an icon of transcendence, as a reaching to the sky world. Magical flight incorporates sorcery, mythology, solar cults, ecstasy and funerary symbolism; this is one of the great themes of the collective unconscious, common to all mankind and likely is one of man's oldest concepts (Eliade 1972:480). Flight is a means of transcending human status, attaining freedom, and gaining the ultimate realities (ibid.:108). It may well be one of man's oldest concepts, coming out of the depths of the human psyche and common to all primitive humanity (ibid.:480).

To find combined bird and man images in the rock art as well as in other cultural contexts is consistent with Oceanic art, going all the way back into Southeast Asia. The image of a bird with human features has such widespread distribution as to suggest a long history and common ancestry.

Peripheral and isolated areas of Polynesia—New Zealand, Hawai'i, and Easter Island—appear to have retained many ancient forms that helps to explain the incidence of birdman symbols in these particular island groups (Barrow 1967:211). Intense focus on the birdman at Easter Island is a reflection of some 1400 years of isolation. The image of birdman became a symbol for a new religion on island; it was likely selected as a sacred motif because of an existing focus on birds and their meaning.

Imagine then an isolated island without contact with the outside world for more than a thousand years. Consider the fervor that must have been associated with the dramatic arrival of the sea birds that came each spring. Their cries would be heard from miles out at sea, and tales were told of the sky being darkened by their wings. The coming of the birds to this strife-torn dot of land surrounded by thousands of miles of empty ocean must have seemed like a gift from the gods. Then it was a time of plenty, with eggs and young birds to eat.

As the season changed, the islanders must have watched with anxiety as the birds wheeled above and flew away to the outside world—a place they would never see. How could they insure the return of the birds? They had only their prayers and offerings as channeled through the birdman (*tangata manu*)—the man who transcended his human status and became Bird. It is no wonder we find myriad examples of birds and birdmen painted and carved on the rocks of Easter Island. These images remain as mute evidence of prayers and offerings, and perhaps also, desperation.

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